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## Collecting for CLIO; The Perspective of an Historian/Archivist

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## COLLECTING FOR CLIO

### THE PERSPECTIVE OF AN HISTORIAN/ARCHIVIST

Steve Gurr

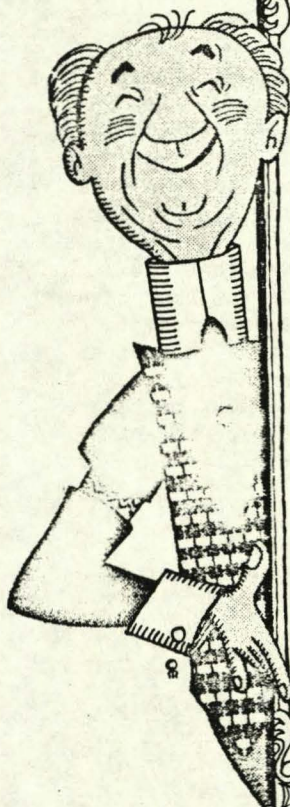
In the summer of 1973 an ambitious, but in many respects ill-defined, project was begun at Georgia Southwestern College. The project, the Southwestern Historic Inventory, was the outgrowth of a proposal designed to join local historical society interests, national funding sources for local historical society projects, undergraduate and graduate students interested in local history and what appeared to be an obvious local need for the location, cataloging, and collecting of the resources in the field of local history.

The Southwestern Historic Inventory sought to draw out and to make available information on and locations of the historical sources for the eight southwestern Georgia counties comprising the Middle Flint Area Planning and Development Commission. Georgia history students, assigned in groups to individual counties, were to seek out sources of historical data--maps, photographs, manuscripts, local printed histories, as well as church records, official county and city documents, data on historic sites, and legends and folk tales--whatever might help document the past of any given community. The Sumter Historic Preservation Society made a generous grant for the project with the understanding that efforts for Sumter County would include building a local collection in Americus for the Society. A local history archive then became an important secondary goal.

Having determined in general terms what to look for, methods were formulated for reaching the desired objectives. During the summer of 1973 student teams were assigned

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# WANTED

Photos - Post Cards -  
Letters - Maps - Etc.

Information about especially the downtown area and the Windsor.

The Sumter Historic Preservation Society and the Southwestern Historic Inventory are seeking the above items which illustrate what Americus was like in the past. We do not want to keep these items but are interested in making copies for our collections about the history of the area.

We would be most interested in interviewing people who have special recollections about the city or the county. If you have items or information about items that we might examine please contact:

Steve Gurr  
Phone: 924-6111, ext. 264  
Or write % Division of  
Social Science  
Ga. Southwestern College  
Americus, Ga. 31709

Advertisement for Southwestern Historic Inventory, from  
Americus Times-Recorder, September 4, 1973.



counties with lists of suggested types of materials to investigate. When feasible, students personally visited communities, but in some instances individual students made inquiries through correspondence with county officials and with state-level sources such as the state archives. In two of the counties students made photographs of historic sites and copied manuscripts and other photographs. Elsewhere, community citizens were concerned about materials being taken outside the community.

For every county, certain specific categories of information could be reported with a high degree of regularity and finality. It was possible to check off the location of extant microfilm copies of newspapers, printed local histories, public library holdings in local history, and official county and city records, all of which were housed in repositories or offices open to the public. A similar situation existed for church records, although there were instances of lost records or hearsay evidence that could not be definitely corroborated. As expected, it was the private holdings which most frequently eluded the search teams. A few old photographs surfaced, copies of letters were occasionally shared, and tips on individuals who had or knew of important sources were forthcoming. For the most part, however, in the good old southern tradition, the prominent family of the community kept to itself, reluctant to share or even to acknowledge its hidden treasures.

In Sumter County, a public request for records was made through a newspaper advertisement in hopes of bringing privately-held sources to the surface. The attractively designed and prominently displayed appeal in a small, widely read local newspaper resulted in but two responses. In retrospect, the impersonal nature of the appeal may have done more harm than good for the project effort. The personal identification of the project director seemed to be the most effective means of unearthing fugitive materials in Sumter County. No amount of impersonal solicitation could do the work of a short conversation between the director and local sources.

In the end, results from the several counties were uneven, leading to some confusion on the part of the student participants, and thus, no doubt, weakening our effectiveness. At present only a cursory compilation of our findings for three of the four counties of the study has been made. More attention, however, has been given to the fourth, Sumter

County. This attention derives from the peculiar relationship of Sumter County to the project.

A major adjunct to the initial project became the effort to establish an archive of local history for the Sumter Historic Preservation Society. In this connection, attempts were made to secure photocopies of materials relating to the history of the county as they were uncovered in the larger survey. The meager beginnings of the archives have fallen into two major categories: archival materials relating to the Society itself, being the "self-creating" portion of our collection, and the local history collection, encompassing a wide variety of materials, but as yet lacking significant depth. Through the cooperation of Georgia Southwestern College, these materials are housed in the rare book and map room of the James Earl Carter Library.

The "self-creating" category includes clippings files of newspaper accounts of Society activities and projects, copies of the newsletter, legal documents relating to the incorporation of the Society and the securing of its tax-exempt status, by-laws, certificates of recognition for Society activities, awards and plaques, and finally, correspondence files and minutes of meetings. This portion of the archive is obviously the most manageable and complete, and in the long run may well be the Society's most significant archival effort.

With its interest in local history, the archives has accumulated an interesting assortment of "remembrances of things past." The major divisions of the local history collection are: manuscripts, tapes, color slides of existing and recently-demolished sites, maps, historic publications, photographs, local publications revealing of the past, history oriented clippings, and two special family collections--the Stephen Pace Collection, donated by the widow of the late Congressman from the Third District, and the Eldridge Collection, a gift of Eldridge descendants in the community. Both of the family collections include a variety of photographs, manuscripts, memorabilia, and printed materials. These are considered unified collections, and the components are not housed in the various physical subcategories of the general collection.

A portion of the archival holdings includes items that fit somewhere between "self-creating" and local history materials. Among these are research notes on a booklet



history of the Windsor Hotel, a local turn-of-the-century landmark, as well as research files for the homes of our annual spring tour of homes. Tour brochures and copies of the Windsor booklet are included in this section.

The survey project and the effort to establish an archive generated problems which should be discussed for the benefit of those considering similar efforts. As the project unfolded, the participants were both impressed and dismayed to find that solutions to problems often led to yet other problems. The entire process unfortunately became an exercise in trial and error. Six of the problems proved to be especially difficult.

1. Basic was the task of getting hidden sources out in the open. The project, for the most part, did not call for the surrender of valued family treasures or imagined treasures. Searchers simply wanted to locate and establish the existence of materials in an effort to help others avoid needless duplication in the quest for research materials. Privately held materials proved extraordinarily elusive, even an acknowledgement of their existence.

2. Burdensome was a lack of expertise in the handling of an unusually wide variety of physical objects which turned up. Both phases of our project brought out materials such as silk shawls, stick pens, tintypes, and parchment, which demanded the attention of a person knowledgeable in conservation.

3. Storage and maintenance of materials, closely related to the preceding problem, created questions of its own. For example, after the technical issue of initial treatment and care of the materials had been solved, the real problem of storage remained, involving security and accessibility as well as space.

4. Cataloging of both ordinary and unusual materials in the collection presented a challenge. The difficulty was one of reaching a decision that must be lived with, perhaps forever.

5. Conflicts in holdings caused concern. Even in a small community situation involving strictly local items, conflicts needed to be minimized with other community efforts--library, church, school, civic club--all seeking to perform service similar to that of the archives. State, regional, and national

conflicts could compound the problem.

6. Finally, limits on the collection had to be considered. Where does the collector draw the line in accepting materials when, for instance, one rejection of a "worthless" item may jeopardize future prospects for obtaining important items?

Collectors will have to find their own effective solutions to these six problems. But our experience offers the following suggestions:

A. Rely upon personal contact. Find a readily available individual who is willing to put in many hours before civic organizations, clubs, high school students, groups of all kinds. In communities the size of Americus, and in those smaller, there is a distinct advantage to having a person readily identified in the community who is highly visible, patient, grateful, personal and personable, and is available for small talk. This person can be your major asset in uncovering those hidden sources.

B. In-house problems, such as physical treatment, storage, maintenance, and cataloging require detailed and patient attention, preferably by one or two individuals who will be associated with the project efforts for the foreseeable future. We have found considerable aid in the publications available through the American Association for State and Local History. These provide well-written instructions on museum management, as well as technical information on the treatment and cataloging of manuscripts and on the ephemera that gathers in most collections of this type. Manuscript appraisal, the treatment of paper, wood, and textiles, and display tips are among the many topics covered by AASLH publications.

C. In dealing with most of the problems mentioned above, it is a good idea to establish a proven method or routine, whether in the gathering, storage, cataloging or use of the collection. Routine procedures will expedite collection management and help in establishing a reputation for stability and dependability, both important in securing additions to the collection. Look into the suggestions offered by AASLH, the Society of American Archivists, and the Georgia Department of Archives and History. Discuss alternatives with your board members and make decisions that will be lasting and workable for your situation.



D. The problems related to conflicts with other collections and decisions about limiting the nature of your collection are central. Locally, try to reach understandings with other collecting agencies. If they are already engaged in a particular project, carefully consider the possible effects from competing with them. Let them know what you are contemplating. Such caution could well gain a valuable ally instead of creating a serious enemy. Seek out the opinions of archivists and collectors beyond the community. Consider seriously the negative implications of a local collection. Does the retention of local materials conflict seriously with the aims of a major state project or university effort? Faced with a real problem of having potential donors unwilling to deposit except in a local collection, permission eventually may be secured for copies to be deposited elsewhere. If the local collection unearths otherwise buried materials, it could be of great service by making the existence of the material known. Establish a policy of reporting on your accessions to the major collections in the state and to those publications which inform the public on the status of collections. GEORGIA ARCHIVE and the Georgia Historical Quarterly should receive regular reports on additions to holdings.

E. A final and critical concern is whether or not to limit the collection by drawing lines as to what will be accepted. For the present no limits have been placed on our collection in Sumter County. Given the experience of almost two years, we believe that the rejection of any materials would not have improved our collection and in fact very likely would have generated attitudes which the project has sought to overcome. By the same token, the archives could not in some cases accept all offers. For example, the Harold Papers, recently given to Emory University, were physically too voluminous for local storage. Nonetheless, each offer must be considered on its own merits to avoid the very real danger of encouraging the continued hoarding of materials by private sources.

The newly installed president of the American Association for State and Local History, Richard D. Williams, said in an editorial in the October, 1974, History News:

Time has come . . . to redefine and to reassess old, slightly derogatory ideas about a "professional" vis-a-vis an "amateur." Unless we do reexamine our



preconceptions, we may misunderstand relationships influenced by events in the last twenty-five years: the remarkable increase in America's educational level, the intense specialization in knowledge and professions, and the very success of the AASLH's program in increasing standards of performance. At the turn of this century, professional historians with Ph.D. degrees and training in Germanic methodology dismissed local history by amateurs as "antiquarian"--lacking perspective and critical rigor. As with other traditional relationships--husband-wife, employer-employee, teacher-student--the professional-amateur dichotomy needs new insights.

Dr. Williams' remarks have special relevance for those involved in collecting for the local historical society, who must develop a thoughtful perspective on the archivist-citizen dichotomy.

What should a particular society be collecting? That depends on its purpose. It can determine its purpose partly by looking at the efforts of others. Let others know what is being attempted and why. What should not be collected? Consider carefully those items which may be more valuable on deposit elsewhere. Be receptive and flexible within a framework of established purposes and goals.